

THE CREATIVE WORD

Ezekiel 37

“You’re out!” the umpire says as the batter watches the ball go by. “No way!” says the batter. “It was outside!” “Three strikes, you’re out,” says the umpire as he points the player toward the dugout. The player can say the pitch was outside. Watching on TV the slow motion instant replay with a computer imaged strike zone on the screen the announcers can say it was a ball. But those are just opinions. Those are just descriptions. The umpire’s call is prescriptive. It commands. It doesn’t matter what we, the batter, or the instant replay show. The batter is out. He must go to the dugout. The umpire has authority. What he says must happen.

But why? Is the pitch a strike because it can be proven to be a strike? Is it a strike because the umpire’s decision altered the ball’s direction to make it a strike? No, it is a strike because Major League Baseball has agreed to give that authority to the umpire. Otherwise it would be mass confusion with so much time spent arguing over whether it was a ball or a strike. Even with the instant replays used as challenges in pro-football, both sides could still argue many calls either way. You still need an official to make the final call. And think of all the times that would stop the flow of the game

That is really true with all human authority. We obey the government because we agree to listen to it. Jefferson spoke in the Declaration of Independence about the government ruling by the “consent of the governed.” Without that we’d have mass chaos. We pay for things with money. Why? Because we all agree that the money has the value to purchase. Otherwise a \$20 bill is just a worthless piece of paper.

But what about what God says to us? For centuries people believed what God said was the way it is, even if people didn’t follow what God said. The Ten Commandments didn’t just describe a way to live; they were the only way to live. They should be prescriptive, not descriptive. But what if we agree to say otherwise?

People will look at the laws in the Old Testament about what to eat or not eat, about having slaves, about having more than one wife, and say, “We don’t follow those laws today.” Why not? “Because our society has changed.” Therefore those laws don’t apply to us today. What made those statements true was that back then everyone agreed to them. But our world has changed, so those rules no longer apply.” And we see that in the controversies over creation and evolution, homosexuality, and abortion. Is what God says count only as long as we agree to Him, in other words, “by the consent of the governed”?

Our message today is based on Ezekiel 37. Ezekiel was a prophet who was taken with some of the people of Israel into captivity into Babylon. By this time all that was left to Israel was the tiny kingdom of Judah, the area around the city of Jerusalem. God had allowed many nations to invade the land of Israel. He allowed the Assyrians to destroy the northern half of Israel. Then the Babylonians conquered the south and left in place of King Jehoiachin his uncle

Zedekiah to rule. Zedekiah was a vassal. That meant he was to rule the land, but only on behalf of Babylon. Why did all of this happen to Israel? Because they decided that God's Word did not apply to them. It wasn't that they got together and made a referendum saying to God, "Your Word no longer applies." No, they just gradually drifted away from it. It wasn't so much that they objected to God's land. They just acted as if it were irrelevant.

In the past several Sundays we have been hearing Jesus talk to His disciples on the night before He died. If we just focus off that part of God's Word, what do we have? "Love one another as I have loved you." "Be one as I and the Father are one." Are we one with one another as we argue with our husband or wife or parents or children? We want to remain in Jesus when we are in trouble, but keep him at a distance when He might "get in the way." The result is that God's Word is something we discard. It's like the newspaper-something we use less and less because of the internet.

But God tells Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones." To prophecy is to speak God's Word. As Ezekiel speaks God's Word, the bones link together; then flesh and skin form over them. Finally they come to life like a vast army. Ezekiel emphasizes that these were "dry" bones. They had been there for a long time so that only the bones were left. These aren't the bodies of those who might only have looked dead. They were totally dead. Yet God's Word not only commanded those bones; He brought them back to life.

God's Word is not descriptive or even prescriptive. It is creative. God's Word has authority whether or not anyone agrees with it. It doesn't need "the consent of the governed." It is self-authoritative. What God says is, regardless of what anyone else thinks or does.

We see that in what God told Ezekiel. Through most of the book of Ezekiel He is warning the people who had gone into exile in Babylon with Ezekiel that later the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem and the temple and take many more captives as exiles. They didn't want to hear that message. Then when those new exiles began to come to Babylon and tell them that Jerusalem had been destroyed, God commanded Ezekiel to bring them a message of comfort. The people of Israel had treated God's Word as if it was irrelevant. As a consequence of that, their nation was destroyed. They became like the valley of dry bones. But from that lifeless nation God would bring new life. He would restore the nation. And that would happen as the Persian emperor would conquer Babylon and allow the captives to return from exile and restore Israel.

But even more God would bring life from death by his creative Word as He began the Church. Today is Pentecost. We heard the story of that first Pentecost. A group of disciples of Jesus was gathered together in Jerusalem. Jesus had ascended into heaven ten days before. But the Holy Spirit, who breathed new life into the valley of dry bones, breathed new life into the disciples as they spoke to people in their own language about Jesus. He turned the Church from a tiny group of disciples into a movement that was to overcome the mighty Roman Empire and spread the faith all over the world. That didn't happen because people agreed to follow God's

Word. It happened because God's Word created that faith in them, just as the dry bones were turned into a vibrant army.

That's God's Word to you and me today. It doesn't depend on whether or not we agree with it. That is a good thing, because then we'd never be forgiven; we'd never have the hope of eternal life. It doesn't even depend on whether or not we believe—God's Word is not effective because our belief makes it that way. My baptism, the benefits given in Holy Communion, and my going to God for forgiveness don't depend on how I feel. They all depend solely on God's Word which says they are so.

“Remain in Me, and I will in you.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” “Be one as I and the Father are one.” Those words are not just advice to us. They are simply commands. That is God's creative Word, God making happen what we could never do. As we go to the cross and hear God's Word tell us how much He loves us, then we do remain in Him, love as He loves us, and join as one with each other. God's Word doesn't say it; it does.